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Motown or Ghosttown? Ruin Porn In Detroit

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JAN 20, 2011

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You've seen the pictures of Detroit: empty schools, abandoned skyscrapers, tumbleweeds blowing down the streets. The haunting shell of the [Michigan Central Station](#). You've heard the stories, too: a house for [100 dollars](#)! Motor City has gone belly up, the city that represented so much about post-war optimism in the United States turned derelict and defunct ghost-metropolis. The post-recession images of hopelessness have almost become a genre of their own--ruin porn, some have called it. [Andrew Moore's](#) Detroit Disassembled and Yves Marchand and Romain Meffre's upcoming [The Ruins of Detroit](#) are two recent examples of glossy photo books that depict the urban decay in Detroit, and the similarly-themed documentary Requiem for Detroit? was released last year. Most of us have been content to let these images stand in for a city that we have never been to and may never go to.

Some of Motown's residents are speaking out, however, against the artists who drop in on writing assignments and photography projects to turn the image of a city's pain into a curiosity. Is Detroit the car crash we can't take our eyes off of? Is it wrong of us to stare? Or is there something more profound in these striking images of abandonment?

Detroit Today Is Your City Tomorrow Detroit has always been a bellwether of crisis in America as well as a representation of certain bedrock ideals, writes [John Patrick Leary](#) in Guernica. "Photographs like Moore, Marchand, and Meffre's succeed, at least, in compelling us to ask the questions necessary to put this story together—Detroit's story, but also the increasingly-familiar story of urban America in an era of prolonged economic crisis. That they themselves fail to do so testifies not only to the limitations of any still image, but our collective failure to imagine what Detroit's future—our collective urban future—holds for us all."

'Ruin Porn' Is a Reflection of Our Own Mortality, says [Kyle Chayka](#) on Hyperallergic. "In the apex of our era of high-flying capitalism, Detroit ruin porn functions as just such a momento mori, a call to remember that the same fate as Motor City could befall all of our great cities, all of our unstable accomplishments. I think Detroit ruin porn is so popular,

and such a well-traveled visual avenue, in part because we want to be reminded that it could all fail. The voyeurism isn't just gawking at the old buildings; it's gawking at the possibility and the danger of death."

Poverty Looks a Little Too Good on Film "Poverty, systemic failures of government—and any sense of progress—all of this overshadowed by the photogenic qualities of a good slant of sunlight cutting through the lobby of an abandoned public library," notes [Andrew Sargus Klein](#) on Splicetoday. "It's almost as if the photos are too beautiful ...

Look at our professional execution; look at the framing, the lighting, the visual play of iron tracery and peeling paint, dust and sunlight and negative space."

Ruin Porn Is Counter-Productive, laments [Matthew Newton](#) on Thought Catalog.

What's problematic about this approach is that it does little but gawk at the cities and people in distress. In other words, it actually contributes to the problem by fueling the notion that Detroit (and depressed cities like it) are beyond help. The glut of disaster porn photography currently cycling on the Internet has outsiders convinced Detroit is a post-apocalyptic wasteland, devoid of hope or humanity. If anything, this is counterintuitive [sic] to the potential good art can do.

People Live There, Too Michigan Radio has a podcast and [article](#) online that includes the perspective of two Detroit photographers whose work focuses on the living side of the city. "Roman Blanquart and Brian Widdis got so fed up a couple years ago with people parachuting in from all over the world to take pictures of the so called 'ruins' of Detroit they responded with their own website called [Can't Forget the Motor City](#)," which focuses on pictures of things like "Mexican teens swinging on a park swing set, a pregnant couple embracing, a group of people dancing at John's Carpet House, a weekly summer blues jam in an abandoned lot."

Forget Rome "The industrial ruins in this American city are at least as spectacular, and largely unmatched in scale anywhere in the United States," writes [Linda Yablonsky](#) in the NYT's T Magazine, noting the estimated "33,000 empty houses and 91,000 vacant lots," in the city. "Detroit, home of the American automobile industry and a once-mighty symbol of enterprise and ingenuity, is a city of haunting contradictions."

Sprawl Porn, Anyone? [Jonathan Hiskes](#) at Grist notes a similar phenomenon with suddenly popular class of photography documenting suburban sprawl in the United States. "There's something of a parallel trend for sprawl: illustrations of the overbuilt, over-mortgaged empty subdivisions littering exurban America. The implied message is quite often that these places were built carelessly and are unaffordable, unsustainable, damn near unlovable."

[Detroitism](#), John Patrick Leary, Guernica

[Fetish For Decay](#), Kyle Chayka, Hyperallergic

[Poverty Is Photogenic](#), Andrew Sargus Klein, Splice Today

[Last Exit Detroit](#), Matthew Newton, Thought Catalog

[Art vs. Ruin Porn](#), Jennifer Guerra, Michigan Public Radio

[Artists in Residence](#), Linda Yablonsky, T Magazine

[Sprawl Porn](#), Jonathan Hiskes, G